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Words Reread. Middle English Writing Systems and the Dictionary^{*}

A textual critic engaged upon his business is not at all like Newton investigating the motions of the planets: he is much more like a dog hunting for fleas. If a dog hunted for fleas on mathematical principles, basing his researches on statistics of area and population, he would never catch a flea except by accident. They require to be treated as individuals; and every problem which presents itself to the textual critic must be regarded as possibly unique.

A.E. Housman, 'The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism' (1921) quoted from *A.E. Housman Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter (Cambridge, 1961), 132–3

This passage from A.E. Housman, the poet and virtuoso editor of classical texts, is often cited as evidence that the process of arriving at 'correct' readings from manuscript texts is an art not a science. The process of textual criticism applies as much to medieval vernacular texts as to ancient classical ones. But, as Housman himself amply demonstrated, the textual flea-hunter does not lack suitable and powerful tools. One can generalise from the characteristics of even individual fleas: textual readings are produced by scribes who do not work at random, but who employ individual writing *systems*. Housman's often scathing opinions of other editors were directed against those who ignored the habits of copyists (Carter, 1961: 50).

Housman's experience of the behaviour of scribes was as 'corrupters' of originally 'correct' texts. His attitude towards the editing of the works of classical authors was typically humanistic. Tim William Machan (1994: 14) describes the humanist approach towards editing as 'recognition of an original form of a text as the product of an individual and as distinct from subsequent developments of that text — as in fact the *correct* form of the text'.¹

The corollary to this editorial attitude is that textual readings that are not authorial, or at least archetypal, are of no value or interest. In extreme cases 'corrupt' manuscript readings are edited out altogether, even from texts surviving in only one version. Where there survives more than one version of a text, readings different from

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¹ Machan quotes John D'Amico (1988: 8): 'Meaning was connected to and dependent upon the integrity of the word, and the wrong word led to falsehood. In order properly to understand a text, one had to discover the actual words of the author; this usually meant extracting them from the corrupt manuscripts'.

those of the designated ‘best’ text may receive no consideration at all. In the editing of Middle English texts the influence of the humanist desire to establish a textual stemma, by means of which to reconstruct the lost archetype from which all surviving witnesses derive, is still strong. Many if not most editors still strive to establish a single ‘best’ text as close to the supposed authorial version as possible.

The philologist’s and linguistic historian’s response to this editorial hijacking of Middle English manuscript variants was to produce fully diplomatic single text editions recording, unemended, all scribal readings as they appeared in a particular manuscript version. Anne Hudson (1977: 38–39) is disparaging of this conservative approach, championed (at least at its outset) by the Early English Text Society. She considers it a method that ‘exalts palaeography as sole editor’ and that ‘reveres the least whim of the scribe’. This criticism is reasonable if editorial guidance is seen to be the main desideratum, but it fails to acknowledge the philological and lexicographical motivation behind the approach, pointed out by Machan (1994: 49–50). The motivation was, in part at least, to provide lexically exact texts for the then ongoing *Oxford English Dictionary*. Machan, however, is also critical of this type of edition’s ‘almost religious devotion to the appearance of a manuscript’s text’ since ‘initial reading for the *OED* is long since completed’. What he fails to acknowledge is that the editors of the *MED* (among many others) have subsequently also profited from the detail and accuracy of this kind of edition. Further, just because initial reading (and indeed publication) of a dictionary may be ‘completed’, it should not be assumed that there is no more work to do. Moreover, the diplomatic single text edition is the only kind suitable for full linguistic study. Any other kind of edition introduces linguistic fiction.

I do not intend in this paper a general engagement with the complex matter of editorial theory. The point I want to make here is that though the historical lexicographer is largely dependent on the editor of texts to provide him with sources for words and their contexts, the aims of the editor do not always optimally serve those of the dictionary maker. The compiler of dictionaries of past stages of language has more of a symbiosis with the editor of diplomatic texts than with the producer of other types of edition. This is because the historical lexicographer is not interested only in the usage of accepted authors but in the linguistic contributions of any user of the language at the relevant

period. He is interested in ‘correct’ only in contradistinction to ‘erroneous’ usage,² not just as examples of ‘best’ or ‘authorial’ usage.

In this respect the aims of the historical lexicographer differ somewhat from those of the maker of a dictionary of modern language. Modern language dictionaries are based on established usage, which is potentially or theoretically verifiable as such. One-off or very transient words or expressions may well not be recorded for posterity. The historical lexicographer is not in a position to be either so particular or so omniscient about the status of a word. In the case of Middle English, surviving usage is by definition written usage and we cannot know in detail to what extent the surviving examples of any individual recorded word represent its general currency in the period. It is one of the strengths of the *MED* that ‘oncers’ are regularly recorded with status equal to commonly appearing words. Moreover, while no lexicographer wants to record erroneous usage (unless the mistake turns out by hindsight to represent the beginnings of a linguistic change) the editors of *MED* have been admirably inclusive in their attitude towards variants that may represent scribal ‘errors’. They are labelled as such, sometimes with queries attached, but are nevertheless retained. After all, one never knows when another such spelling might turn up, and in any case one still wants to know what the putative ‘error’ might mean.

Of course, scribes did make mistakes. But they were not in general the incompetent fools that some editors would make them. My experience tallies with Derek Pearsall’s (1985: 103) in according to most scribes copying Middle English texts ‘a high level of intellectual and even critical engagement’. Is ‘scribal error’ always erroneous, or is it sometimes merely unusual or ill-understood scribal system?

Middle English lexicography arguably has an even stronger link with Middle English dialectology than it does with diplomatic editing; though the concerns of all these disciplines overlap and the symbiosis is three-way. The aim of the *MED* has been to record Middle English words, their variant spellings and their different usage, both in varying contexts and also through time. Unlike the single text edition, which records the detail of a single system, the aim of the Middle English dialectologist is to record large numbers of Middle English writing systems for the purpose of comparison. Comparisons are made within the context of the geographical and temporal placing of those systems and the mapping in space and time of their variant forms. Every Middle English scribe is

² That is usage which is demonstrably (or at least arguably) the result of a mistake on the part of a scribe.

regarded as an authentic user of language and each scribal contribution as potentially reflecting that authentic usage or that of a precursory exemplar. For a historical dictionary also, every example of language use counts. But Middle English spelling is not fixed, so the status and implication of any one spelling must be assessed in terms of the scribal writing system in which it occurs before it can be accurately recorded in the dictionary. The format of a dictionary does not, of course, easily reveal the system of any one individual. Here the diplomatic editor or the dialectologist can provide for the lexicographer the scribal context by means of which spellings can be taxonomised.

This paper is written from the point of view of a Middle English dialectologist; I am in the process of producing a Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English (LAEME). The work is in the tradition of a *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediæval English* (LALME) and is one of two daughter atlases in progress at the Institute for Historical Dialectology at the University of Edinburgh.³

The production of LALME entailed the recording of individual scribal language systems by questionnaire. The methodology we are using for the present generation of linguistic atlases is based on the same principles of description and comparison but differs in detail. With the increasing capacity and flexibility of computer systems, we have been able to harness computer techniques of data storage, retrieval and comparison from the outset of the new projects. We transcribe entire texts (or large samples of very long texts) onto disk in a form which can then be analysed, sorted and compared by computer much more efficiently and accurately than they could by hand and eye.⁴ The advantage of this method over a questionnaire is that *all* the linguistic data can be subjected to analysis without the investigator being committed to a pre-selected set of dialectal discriminants. It therefore aims to resolve Gilliéron's famous paradox that for the results to be optimal the questionnaire really ought to be devised after the investigation. We call the process Tagging and use the term as shorthand for what is in fact a detailed lexico-grammatical taxonomy. Many of the decisions we make in tagging a text are 'editorial' and each tagged text is like a plain text diplomatic edition with a running gloss.

The writing systems of individual scribes are the stock in trade of the historical dialectologist. Linguistic Profiles (LPs) derived from questionnaires, such as appear in LALME, are partial taxonomies of scribal systems. The methodology we are using now

³ The other is a Linguistic Atlas of Older Scots being undertaken by Keith Wiliamson.

⁴ The relevant programs have all been devised by Keith Williamson.

still produces only partial taxonomies, because we are constrained by the fragmentary and accidental nature of what survives as written Middle English. We have no surviving record of probably many thousands of medieval scribes whose work has been lost or destroyed. And no single surviving witness can claim to represent the whole of its author's or copyist's written repertoire. But our present methods of recording and analysis do have advantages over the traditional questionnaire, which make the record of scribal systems potentially fuller than that presented in *LALME*.

In this paper I will illustrate, with four examples from early Middle English, how detailed knowledge of scribal writing systems can inform and clarify uncertain textual readings and thereby provide some scientific aid to Housman's dog in his flea-hunt. The vast and detailed resource of the *MED* provides a wider context of examples to support or challenge these suggested clarifications.

It must be remembered that our data, scribal writing systems, are almost always those of copyists of a text or of texts from some earlier exemplar. Even rare authors' holographs are unlikely to have been committed directly onto parchment from the mind of the author. Some rough version will lie between the conception of the text and the first fair copy. A so-called 'original' reading can mean at least two things: (a) whatever was intended by the author (or authors) of the text as sanctioned by whatever authorial version lay *ultimately* behind the present scribe's copy; or (b) whatever was intended in the precursory exemplar of the text that was the *origin of the present scribe's reading*. (b)-type readings can imply also (a)-type, but (a)-type need not include (b)-type. Lexicographers and dialectologists are mainly interested in (b)-type readings and it is readings of this kind that I shall illustrate here.

When recording words and their usage in *MED*, or when tagging an early Middle English text for *LAEME*, the simplest examples are those where (whatever the putative author of the text may have intended) the copying scribe of the present version knew what was intended in his exemplar, and where we also are confident of what his surviving copy intends. Then everyone is happy. We know what the word in question is and probably also its etymology. It can be entered in the *MED* with its definition and its contextual quotations. And it can be tagged accurately.

My examples illustrate various ways in which this happy situation can go wrong.

(1) My first example illustrates confusion caused not by the author, exemplar or copying scribe, but by modern editors.

(2) My second example is a misreading resulting from an unnecessary emendation made by a contemporary early Middle English reviser or editor, which has been accepted by modern editors.

(3) My third example is one where modern editors are divided as to whether there is a problem; the most recent consider emendation unnecessary. But at least one early Middle English copyist thought something was wrong. My tentative solution attempts to get the best of both worlds.

(4) My fourth and final example has been judged by modern editors to be a corrupt reading requiring radical emendation. But I think the text is all right as it stands.

(1) The first example has resulted in the infiltration of the *MED* by a mole, and a French mole at that. Here he is.

toupe n. [OF **taupe**] A small mammal of the family
 Talpidae, a mole. ?c1350 *Ballad Sc. Wars* 89: Ay Toupe..es
 redy tare, Agayn him yitt es nane tat dou; On yonde-alf
 Humbre es ay Bare, Be he sped, sal side ssou. [MS: sides sou — ML]

He is not what he seems, but has achieved his position under cover of a smoke screen of ambiguity and misinformation. What is his true identity and where did he come from? He appears in a uniquely surviving verse text on fols. 180r–181v of British Library, Cotton Julius A.v. The hand of the text is of the first half of the 14th century. Its language is strongly northern in character and is reasonably homogeneous. The poet places himself geographically in Northumberland:

As I yod on ay mounday by-twene wyltinden and walle.
 Me ane aftere brade waye. ay litel man y mette with-alle.⁵ lines 1-2.

Ingeborg Nixon (1983: 41–42) suggests that these places are ‘either Willington, outside Newcastle, and Wallsend about a mile distant, or perhaps Whittington village 5 miles east of Hexham and Wall a mile to the north’. The little man himself is said to be on his way:

Fra Lanchestre ye parke syde yeen he come wel faire his pase.⁶ line 6.

⁵ ‘As I went on a Monday between Wyltinden and Walle, myself alone along a broad path, I met with a little man.’

⁶ ‘From Lanchester the park side, thence he came, at a very fair pace’.

Lanchester is 15 miles south-east of Newcastle. The language of the present text could well be of Northumberland.

The text itself is of a kind most difficult for editors to assess. It has been variously described as ‘Verses in old English, seemingly a prophecy of some battle between the English and the Scots’ (Finlay, 1808: 163, quoting the British Museum catalogue entry for Cotton Julius A.v.); ‘A Northumberland ballad, containing a political prophecy... an early form of the Erceldoune ballads’ (Ward 1883: 300) and ‘A ballad on the Scottish Wars’ (*IMEV* 379, Wells 1916: IV.24; Robbins in Hartung 1975: XIII.292). The *Ballad on the Scottish Wars* (hereafter *BSW*) as it survives seems to combine what may previously have been three different elements. The first is a version of the ballad of ‘the wee wee man’. The poet meets on the road a dwarf of unusual physical strength who takes him to his dwelling place where the poet sees a banquet laid out and ladies singing. In the second element the poet asks a ‘mody barn’ what the outcome will be of the war in the North. The third element is a different prophecy, perhaps about a different Anglo-Scottish war, that will happen at a time ‘aftere neuweyers day’.

Such political prophecies were made popular by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Prophetiae Merlini* which were later incorporated into his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, completed in 1138. Later prophecies were also attributed to Merlin and others came to be associated with Thomas of Erceldoune, John of Bridlington and St Thomas à Becket. Many share the pattern established by Geoffrey of Monmouth wherein animals personify humans and/or animal cognizances represent their bearers (Hartung 1975: XIII:271). As Wells (1916: IV p. 221) puts it: ‘All of these pieces are confused and, from their very nature and their method, obscure’.⁷ It is wise to be vague, ambiguous and enigmatic when predicting the future.

BSW features a leopard and a lion and two other animals. Our ‘toupe’ appears in the second part of the poem, where he confronts a ‘bare’:

Ay toupe he sayde es redy yare. agayn him yitte es nane yat dou.
On yondealfe Humbre es ay bare. be he sped sal sides sou.⁸

lines 45–6

A toupe sal stande agayn a bare. he es ful bald him dar habide
Miri man ij prai ye yif you maye. yif yat yi wille ware

⁷ Child, in his edition (1857: 378–381), which omits the prophecies, refers to the ballad as forming ‘the preface to a long strain of incomprehensible prophecies of the same description as those which are appended to *Thomas of Ersyldoune*’.

⁸ ‘A “toupe”’ he said ‘is ready there; against him is yet none that may prevail. On the other side of the Humber is a “bare” — if he should be successful [or bring matters to a conclusion] flanks (of battle formation) shall suffer.’

Bathe yair names you me saye. wat hate ye toupe and wat ye bare⁹ lines 54–56

Ye toupe in toune youre werkes wayte. to bald his folke he bides stille.¹⁰ line 64

Needless to say, the ‘miri man’ gives no clear answer to the poet’s request to reveal who the two parties are.¹¹ Textual context therefore gives no clues to what kind of animals these may be;¹² we have sole recourse to the spelling system. The ‘bare’ can only be from OE *baƿr* ‘boar’. OE /ɑ:/ in words such as *sār*, *stān*, *hām*, was rounded and raised in non-northern Middle English, eventually giving rise to modern standard English ‘sore’, ‘stone’, ‘home’, but was retained in the North of England and in Scotland, e.g. present day Scots [se:r], [sten], [hem] and cf. Northumberland [stɪən], [hɪəm].

The *BSW* scribe’s writing system has *a* (12x), *an* (2x, both before a following initial vowel) for the indefinite article ‘a’ (beside *ay* 21 times, the <y> perhaps implying length) *ane* (1x) ‘alone’, *ye-tane* (1x) ‘the one’, *begane* (1x, in rhyme) ‘begone’, *bald* (5x) ‘bold’, *bane* (1x, in rhyme) ‘bone’, *bathe* (2x) ‘both’ (beside *bothe* 1x), *brade* (1x) ‘broad’, *fald* pres. pl. ind. (1x) ‘fold’, *ga* inf. (3x), *gane* inf. (1x) ‘go’ (beside *gae* inf. 1x, all three forms in rhyme only), *hame* (2x, in rhyme) ‘home’, *ma* (2x, beside *mae* 1x), *mare* (1x), *mare* (1x) ‘more’ (all forms in rhyme only), *na* (6x) ‘no’ (beside *no* 1x), *na* (5x) ‘nor’ (beside *no* and *ne* 1x each), *nane* (3x, 1x in rhyme) ‘none’, *ald* (1x), *alde* (1x, in rhyme) ‘old’, *rapes* (1x) ‘ropes’, *stan* (1x) *stane* (1x, in rhyme) ‘stone’, *swa* (2x in rhyme) ‘so’ (beside *so* 12x); *tald* pret. and ppl. (1x each, both in rhyme) ‘told’, *twa* (4x, 2x in rhyme) ‘two’, *wa* (3x) ‘who’, *wa* (2x in rhyme) ‘woe’. There are few exceptions to

⁹ ‘A “toupe” shall stand against a “bare”; he is very bold who dares withstand him. Merry man I pray thee if thou may, if it were thy will, that thou tell me both their names: what the “toupe” is called and what the “bare”.’

¹⁰ ‘The “toupe” in town, the watchman of your fortifications, to embolden his people he remains unwavering.’

¹¹ The reply is as follows:

An he sayde outhen nay hate ye tane trou you my lare.

Ar you may yat other say yat sal be falden wyt yat fare.

Previous editors of *BSW* have taken *An* to be ‘and’ and *Ar* to be the conjunction ‘ere’, making little sense of the syntax. But if one reads *En* for *An*, then both words may be taken as initial letters spelled out — clear text capitals are used as initials later in the poem. The sense would then be: “N” he said without denial “the one is called — believe thou my teaching; R thou may call the other, who shall be felled with that attack”. One has sympathy with the poet’s reaction to this reply:

“Ye wisere es ij noth of yat. miri man wat may ys bee.”

“Nou have ij sayde ye wat yai hat. forther wites you nothe for me”.

“I am none the wiser from that; merry man what can this be?” “Now I have told thee what they are called, you will learn nothing further from me”.

¹² Though a mole would be a very unlikely model for a watchman.

the rule that words with OE /ɑ:/ are spelled with <a> in this hand.¹³ In spite of some editors' assumption that the creature in question is a bear,¹⁴ *bare* must be taken as 'boar'.

What then of *toupe*? Here matters are slightly more complex. The scribe uses <ou> in a number of etymologically different contexts. Its most frequent occurrence is in words with OE /u:/: *hou* (3x beside *hu* 1x) < OE *hū*; *nou* (4x) < OE *nū*; *you* (21x) < OE *þū*; *loude* (1x) < OE *hlūd*; *toune* (1x) < OE *tūn*; *boure* (1x) < OE *būr*; *hour* (1x), *oure* (1x) < OE *ūre*; *toure* (1x), *toures* (1x) < OE *tūr*; *souzand* [sic] (1x) < OE *þūsend*; *out* (3x) *oute* (1x) < OE *ūt*; *outen* (2x), *wyt-outen* (2x) *vyt-outen* (1x) < OE *wiþūtan*; *south-* (2x beside *suth* 1x) < OE *sūþ*. At this date the spelling in these words is likely still to imply [u:]. <ou> also appears twice in words with OE /o:/: beside more usual <o>-spellings: *Mounday* (1x) < OE *mōn(an)daeg* 'Monday'; *south* (1x) < OE *sōþ* 'sooth' beside *soye* (1x) and *soech* (1x). In *south* at least, <ou> is likely to imply [o:].¹⁵ Otherwise, <ou> is confined to three further contexts: (1) words with OE -ēow-: *trou* imper. < OE *trēowian* 'believe'; *youre* (1x), *your* (1x), OE *ēower* 'your'; (2) French loan-words in -ou-: *prou* (1x, rhyming with *nou*) 'advantage', cf. OF *pro*, *prou*, *pru*, *preu*; *routes* (1x) 'troops' cf. OF *rote*, *route*, AF *rute*; (3) words with a velar fricative [x] or [ç] in OE: *brouth* (1x) 'brought' < OE *br hte*; *nouth* (2x) 'not' < OE *nō(wi)ht* (beside *noth* (6x), *nothe* (1x); *south* [sic] (2x), *thouth* (1x), *youth* (1x) 'seemed' < OE *tūhte*; *dougty* (2x) 'doughty' < OE *dohtig*, *dyhtig*; *mouth* 3rd sg. pret. 'might' < OE ?**mohte* (beside *moxiste* [sic], 1x); *youth* (1x), *youche* (1x) beside *yoth* (1x) 'though', cf. OE *þāh*, *þēah* presumably influenced by Scandinavian *þó*; *dou* (1x) 'prevail' (< OE *dugan*) in rhyme with *sou* (1x) 'suffer' (< OE *sugian*); *elbouthe* [sic] (1x) 'elbow' < OE *elboga*. The length and quality of the vowel(s) (or perhaps diphthong(s)) in category (3) cannot be precisely known; nor is it possible to say for sure what kind of fricative(s), if any, may be implied by the <th>/<ch>-spellings. But 'toupe' has no intervocalic fricative and its origins seem likely to go back to OE /u:/ or /o:/.¹⁶

¹³ It seems that OE /ɑ:/ in the word 'so' has rounded in this scribe's dialect presumably by the influence of preceding /w/ which was subsequently deleted. Note that <so> forms are not uncommon in Northern Middle English and also appear, though more rarely, in Older Scots. The forms in *swa*, rhyming on *wa* 'woe' and *twa* 'two' presumably reflect authorial variants.

¹⁴ 'Bear' is from OE *bera* with etymological short /e/. In Middle English it would therefore have either short /e/ or the results of open syllable lengthening, neither of which would be likely to be spelled with <a> in Northern Middle English.

¹⁵ The day-name compound 'Monday' probably would not have retained a long first vowel. The vowel would be expected to have undergone trisyllabic shortening and here it is likely that <ou> represents [u]. 'Sooth' is a candidate for Northern Fronting; the <oe> in *soech* could perhaps imply a front rounded vowel [ø:]. I owe this last observation to Keith Williamson.

¹⁶ Or possibly OF *ou*; but see fn. 17.

Modern English ‘tup’ meaning ‘ram’ is the obvious candidate. Its origin is unknown, and its usage nowadays is mainly confined to northern England and to Scotland, but late OE place-names thought to be based on it suggest that the word may have existed in Old English in the form **tōp* (see *topeslage* and *topesle* in Herefordshire cited in *MED* s.v. *tup*(pe n. (c)). AL *tuppus* and Middle English spellings in *tuppe* suggest that a form with short /u/ may also have been current. But the preferred etymology in **tōp* is in any case a plausible source for our present scribe’s *toupe*.¹⁷

Some early editors of *BSW* were certainly in no doubt of the identity of the animal. The poem seems first to have been edited by John Finlay in 1808 (163–184). Finlay’s text is not very accurate, but his edition does include a glossary (185–205) in which *toupe* is correctly glossed ‘a ram’. *BSW* was printed again in 1828 by an anonymous editor under the heading ‘Early English Poetry’ in *The Retrospective Review* (1828: 326–331). The editor clearly had no knowledge of Finlay’s edition since he expresses astonishment that the poem ‘should have escaped Dr Wharton, Ritson, and ... all the other poetical antiquaries of the last, if not of the present generation’ and he claims to have ‘rescued it from the oblivion in which it has been so long suffered to remain’. These editions are mentioned by Child (1857: 378) who lambasts both: ‘Both texts are in places nearly unintelligible, and are evidently full of errors, part of which we must ascribe to the incompetency of the editors’. *Pace* Child, the 1828 text is a diplomatic transcription of heartening and very unusual accuracy:¹⁸ there are only about a dozen misreadings of which some at least are probably printer’s errors. It is, however, a plain text edition lacking notes, commentary and glossary with no help for the reader (apart from its accuracy) as to the meaning of the text.

It is unlikely that either of the previous editions was known to Joseph Ritson who edited *BSW* just a year later (1829: vol 1, VIII, p. 40) and whose text is also inaccurate, but usually in different places from Finlay’s.¹⁹ A revision of this edition by W.C. Hazlitt in 1877 (VIII, p. 35) which seems to leave Ritson’s text unchanged, is that cited in *OED*

¹⁷ *MED* also cites AF **tup** and **toup** but suggests that these are likely to originate from Middle English. It would multiply entities unnecessarily to suggest that the spelling *toupe* here was reintroduced from Anglo-French. But in any case the animal remains a ‘tup’ or ‘ram’.

¹⁸ The editor seems to have been familiar with medieval Scots and northern English writing systems and he carefully retains the manuscript spellings including northern <y>, rather than <þ>, for [θ~ð]. He also records all signs of abbreviation as they appear in the manuscript. His only editorial changes seem to be in the splitting of the manuscript long lines into short lines at the caesura and capitalising the first letters of the resulting new lines.

¹⁹ Both Finlay and Ritson somewhat modernise the manuscript spellings substituting <th> for <y> where it implies [θ~ð] and <v> for intervocalic consonantal <u>. Finlay adopts 8-line stanzas and Ritson 4-line stanzas. The manuscript text is written in verse lines but is unbroken.

s.v. *tup* sb. with the single quotation ‘A Toupe sal stande agayn a Bare’.²⁰ Ritson has a glossary in which **toupe** is glossed ‘tup’ (1877: 424).

The glossaries in these early editions are correct; OF *taupe* from L *talpa* ‘a mole’ is not a plausible reading in the present context. Late Latin <al> would normally produce <au> spellings in Old French which, if they were borrowed into Middle English, would normally also be written <au>. In *BSW* there are three relevant examples: *chiuauche* (1x) ‘chivalry’ < OF *chevauch(i)é*; *faute* (1x) ‘lack, deficiency’ < OF *faute* and *leaute* (3x) ‘loyalty’ < OF *lëauté*. If the animal were a mole from OF *taupe* we would expect it to have been spelled **taupe* by this scribe.²¹

So how did ‘the mole’ infiltrate the *MED*? The ambiguous nature of the text surrounding him was very much on his side and he had a number of helpers. The source of the entry in *MED* is the edition of *BSW* by Brandl and Zippel (1917: 137–140). Like the earlier editions, this is an anthology with minimal editorial apparatus.²² The glossary (1917: 397) gives ‘toupe OF taupe, NE mole, *Maulwurf*. Two earlier editions are cited at the head of the verse. One is the Ritson-Hazlitt edition, though Brandl and Zippel seem not to have used its glossary. The other is that by Thomas Wright (1868: 452–467) which forms Appendix IV of his edition for the Rolls Series of Pierre de Langtoft’s *Chronicle*, of which there is a version in BL Cotton Julius A.v. This edition may have been the source for Brandl and Zippel’s gloss.

Wright’s text of *BSW* lacks even the minimal footnotes citing emendations that are found in other editions. There is no glossary, but Wright does provide a running verse translation of the text on facing pages. In this translation *bare* and *toupe* are designated ‘bear’ and ‘mole’. Wright’s mistranslation may ultimately lie behind the mistaken identity in other works. Ward in his *Catalogue of Romances* (1883: 300) cites Wright’s edition and Wright’s translation seems to be the source for Ward’s description of *BSW*: ‘The prophecy, spoken by an elf, begins with the mention of a mole that appears to have been meant for some one then in power in Scotland, and with the contest to be waged against him by a bear at that time south of the Humber’. A confused attempt to have it both ways subsequently appears in Wells’s summary (1916: IV.24): ‘His [the

²⁰ The spellings ‘toup, toupe’ are cross-referenced in *OED* as obsolete forms of ‘tup’.

²¹ There were current at this period two native words for ‘mole’ both very likely present also in OE: *moldewerpe* (cf. OE *molde* ‘earth’ and *werpan* ‘throw’) and *molle, mole* itself (cf. MDu *mol, molle*, MLG *mol, mul*). The earliest example so far recorded of the word *taupe* in English is from 1911 in *OED Supplement IV*, s.v. **taupe** where it is apparent that the word is confined to shades of colour resembling those of moleskin.

²² <p> is substituted for MS <y> where [θ~ð] is implied.

speaker's] inquiry of what shall be the outcome of "this war" between the Northern folk and "ours", brings him prophetic declarations as to the Mole, the Tup, the Bear, the Lion, and the Leopard'.

Another complication is introduced by Brandl and Zippel (1917: 138) in a footnote to the first occurrence of the *toupe* and the *bare*: 'For the prophecy concerning the Boar and the Mole, cf. Henry Ward, Catalogue of Romances I, 1883, 299f'. This reference leads us to the third item listed by Ward (1883: 299) from fols. 177v–179r of BL Cotton Julius A.v: 'Prophecy of Merlin, about the six kings that are to follow King John, who are here called the Lamb of Winchester, the Dragon of Mercy, the Goat of Carnarvon, the Boar of Windsor, the Ass with the Leaden Feet, and the Accursed Mole'. Examination of the manuscript reveals that this prophetic text is in a hand different from that of *BSW* and it is in French. Of the six kings after King John, the Lamb (*aignel*), the Dragon (*dragon*), the Goat (*cheuere*) and the Boar (*sengler*) may perhaps be identified with Henry III, Edward I, Edward II and Edward III respectively. But the hand of the prophecy antedates the second part of Edward III's reign and its composition must certainly precede at least the accessions of Richard II and Henry IV. The texts about the Ass (*asne*) and the Mole (*taupe*) may therefore be regarded as genuine attempts at prophecy or perhaps as warnings. What is clear in any case is that the prophetic text as it stands is not *about* 'the Boar and the Mole'. These creatures appear in separate places in the text and are from different time periods. The Boar is said to have the heart of a lion and the humility of a lamb and he wages wars abroad. The Accursed Mole (*maudist del abouche dieu*) is attacked from the west by a dragon accompanied by a wolf (*Lou*). At the end of his reign England is divided into three parts shared by the dragon, the wolf and the lion. This text appears to have no connection with the prophecies about the Anglo-Scottish wars in *BSW*. The mole here is a French *taupe* in a French text. The circumstantial evidence of the presence of a mole in *BSW* turns out not to stand up against the fingerprint evidence of the writing system of the scribe. This example illustrates a case where both author and copying scribe knew clearly what was intended. It was modern editors who introduced confusion leading to error. But it is salutary to remember that none of the editors of *BSW* had access either to *OED*, whose T-U volume was first published in 1926. Nor did they have *MED* without recourse to which we would certainly all be wrong a great deal more often than we are.

(2) My second example is drawn from a far better known text: the BL Cotton Caligula A.ix version of Lazamon's great verse epic the *Brut*, commonly known as Lazamon A.²³ The *Brut* survives in two manuscripts, both of the second half of the 13th century. The other manuscript is BL Otho C.xiii (Lazamon B) which contains a somewhat abridged version of the poem and which has suffered further accidental abridgement from the Cottonian fire. There are two editions of the *Brut* relevant to the present enquiry. The first is Frederick Madden's three-volume 1847 edition with parallel texts from the two manuscripts. This edition has textual notes, commentary and glossary as well as a running 'crib' translation. The second is Brook and Leslie's two-volume (1963, 1978) edition for the EETS, again with both texts running parallel and including textual footnotes.²⁴ A recent edition by Barron and Weinberg (1995), using the Brook and Leslie transcript of Cotton as its base, adds nothing of relevance to the present case.²⁵

My problem reading is a simile in the description of a great storm at sea. The phrase occurs in very similar words in two different storm scenes in the poem. Both occurrences are in sections written by the main scribe (scribe B) of the text of Lazamon A. The first is on fol. 27vb at lines 2283–87 after the sea battle between Godlac and Brennes over possession of the princess Delgan of Norway:

Æst aras a ladlich weder; þeostrede þa wolcne.
þe wind com on weðere; and þa sæ he wraðede.
vðen þer urnen; also cunes þer burnen.
rapes þer braken; bulu wes fulle [r]iue.
scipen þer sunken;²⁶

The second is on fol. 70va at lines 5973–7 during the voyage of Ursele, earl Athionard's daughter to be married to king Conan of Brittany:

þa aras heom a wind; a þere wiðer side.
swurken vnder sunnen; sweorte weolcnen.
Hazel & ræin þer aræs; te hit i-seh him agras.
vðen þer urnen. [tu]nes swulche þer burnen.
bordes þer breken; [vi]mmen gunnen wepen.²⁷

Both passages show examples of the work of a revising hand, nearly contemporary to scribe B. This reviser makes a number of alterations to the Cotton text. When he erases

²³ I am grateful to Jeremy Smith for supplying me with a transcript of Lazamon A.

²⁴ A third volume to contain commentary and glossary was originally projected but not produced.

²⁵ Other editions are of the Arthurian sections of the poem only.

²⁶ 'From the east arose a dreadful storm, the heavens darkened, the wind came contrary, and the sea became angry, waves there ran [rolled] as if 'cunes' were burning there; ropes there broke — destruction was very severe; ships sank there.'

²⁷ Then a wind arose against them on the contrary side; the dark heavens became black under the sun. Hail and rain arose there — whoever saw it became terrified — waves ran [rolled] there as if towns were burning there; boards there broke, women began to weep.

before correcting it is not always possible to see what scribe B originally wrote, but where it is possible to tell, the alterations seem to be corrections of obvious mistakes, though they are sometimes also of idiosyncratic spellings by scribe B, not necessarily errors. At times therefore the revisions are not strictly necessary, and occasionally they seem to create less good readings than those of scribe B.²⁸ I think it unlikely therefore that the reviser had in front of him the exemplar used by scribe B and it is possible that he made his corrections on an *ad hoc* basis, without recourse to any other copy of the poem.

In the first passage he alters *blieue* to *riue*. This agrees with the Otho text which has *and wowe þer was riue*, and which probably reflects an earlier textual version. But *blieue* could also be ‘correct’ if we assume an adjectival extension of the usual adverbial sense ‘immediately, at once’: ‘destruction was swift’. In the second passage the reviser corrects scribe B’s *summen* to *vimmen*. Again this coincides with Otho’s reading and perhaps also picks up the *voiz feminines* a little further on in the same episode in Wace’s text of *Le Roman de Brut* (Arnold, 1938: 322, line 6056) which was Layamon’s main source. But again, scribe B’s version does make sense and if it is an error it is textual rather than linguistic. The contemporary reviser seems to have been using his editorial judgement in the same way as modern editors do to arrive at a version more plausibly close to the ‘original’.

The problem phrase in the two passages is where the contemporary reviser makes his other ‘correction’ in the second passage. The <tu> of the word ‘towns’ (line 5976) is written on an erasure.²⁹ On the basis of the reviser’s correction here, editors have emended the text in the earlier passage also to <tunes>.³⁰ But were they justified in so doing? The sentence contains a simile, introduced in the first example by *alse*, in the second by *swulche*, both with the sense ‘as if’. A literal translation is ‘waves there ran as

²⁸ E.g. Brook and Leslie (1963) line 1504: original *lime* altered wrongly to *limene* by insertion; line 1632: original read correctly *Leir kin* [for ‘king’] *liðde*; to *scottenæ leoda* (cf. Otho version). The revising scribe alters *kin* to *gan*, making no sense syntactically and causing Brook and Leslie to emend MS *liðde* to *liðe*.

²⁹ I have not yet seen the manuscript and it is very difficult from microfilm to separate the main scribe’s writing from that of the reviser, so I rely here on the opinion of Madden and of Brook & Leslie. The correction as it stands in the microfilm looks more like ‘[tic]nes, but this cannot be what either scribe intended.

³⁰ <t> and <c> are easily confusable in hands of the 13th century as they are often realised by the same *figurae*. The body of the letter is usually identical and the differentiation between the top strokes of the two letters — with that of <t> appearing to the left of the body as well as to the right, and that of <c> appearing only to the right of it — ceased to be observed regularly by all scribes. The cross stroke of <t> does not always come below the top of the body. Where it does, it may do so also with realisations of <c>. But scribe B of Layamon A does preserve the difference between the two letters with great regularity. His <c> always consists of a curved body and a cross stroke which slopes down somewhat from the top of the down stroke (never below the top) and which never begins to the left of it. His <t> is less regular, but the cross stroke is frequently horizontal and often starts below the top of the body. It seems always to cut across the body.

if towns there burned'. This does not seem to me a very likely comparison. The description we are given of the storm is a dark, cold, tempestuous, very wet event. We are asked to liken it to a burning medieval town, whose buildings presumably would be constructed mainly of wood. This produces a bright, flaming hot, very dry image. The action of rolling waves tumbling one upon the other is more like that of the seething, welling and heaving seen in what we nowadays call in culinary terms 'a rolling boil'. If the reading were not in doubt, one might try hard to imagine that the spray rising up from the waves was being likened to the smoke of a conflagration, but it is not an obvious or clearly made connection. Burning towns simply don't seethe or bubble, they blaze.³¹

What did Lazamon mean by it? The simile does not occur in the Otho text in either of the storm scenes so there is no evidence from that version of what was originally intended.³² Wace's versions of the two storms (Arnold, 1938: lines 2479–2488 and 6041–6050) give very lively accounts, but lack the relevant simile:

Une turmente grant leva;
 Li tens mua, li venz turna,
 Tona e plut e esclaira;
 Li ciels neirci, li airs trobla;
 La mer mella, undes leverent,
 Wages crurent e reverserent.
 Nefs comencent a perillier,
 Borz e chevilles a fruisser;
 Rumpent custures e borz cruissent,
 Veilles depiecent e mast fruissent;³³

Es vus tempeste merveilluse;
 E une nue vint pluiuse
 Ki fist le vent devant turner
 L'air nercir, le jur oscurer....

³¹ Madden (1947, I: 195) seems to be unhappy about the image but does his best. He prints *cunes* but as that makes no obvious sense, suggests the emendation 'tunes?' in a footnote. His running crib has: 'there ran the waves as if houses (?) there were burning (i.e. the waves rolled on high like flames of fire)'. Brook and Leslie (1963: 119) emend *cunes* to 'tunes'; their commentary volume is not yet published. Barron and Weinberg's text is taken directly from Brook and Leslie's transcription. They accept the emendation to 'tunes' silently so that there is no indication of a possible textual crux. Their prose paraphrase reads: 'A terrible storm then arose: the sky darkened, the wind blew contrary and stirred up the sea, waves foamed as if towns were ablaze there'. They make no comment in their notes on the apparently contradictory nature of the image.

³² In the first scene the Otho text simply leaves out the two lines containing the simile, while retaining (at least in fragmentary form where the manuscript is damaged) the whole of the rest of the description of the storm. In the second example the Otho text has a blander paraphrase: *wages par arne; stremes par vrne*. It is possible that the reason for the Otho scribe's omission or adaptation of these two lines was because whatever was represented by <cunes> was incomprehensible to him. The word 'tunes' could hardly have presented him with any difficulty. See Madden (1847: xxxiii): 'There are many passages or words in the earlier text, which appear to have become unintelligible or obsolete to the compiler of the later; and these are uniformly omitted, or others supplied in their place'.

³³ 'A great storm arose; the weather turned bad, the wind changed direction, it thundered and rained and lightning flashed. The sky went black, the air was disturbed, the sea became choppy, billows rose up, waves swelled and tumbled. Ships begin to be in danger, boards and pegs to shatter; seams rupture and boards grate together, sails fly in pieces and masts shatter.'

Li ciels trubla, li airs nerci,
 Granz fu li venz, le mer fremi,
 Wages comencent a enfler
 E sur l'une l'autre munter.³⁴

The simile attached to the 'rolling waves' would appear to be Lazamon's own.

It is impossible to tell what scribe B originally wrote in the second example, but we know it cannot have been <tunes> or there would have been no need for the reviser to make a revision. It seems likely that the word was <cunes> as it appears in the similar passage earlier in the poem.³⁵ But <cunes> makes no sense. The intervocalic <n> may, however be read as <u>. The figurae of <n> and <u> are perhaps more often confused than any other two letters in medieval scripts. They are both formed with two minim strokes and many scribes did not differentiate between <n> whose two minims should properly be joined at the top and <u> where the join should be at the bottom.

Scribe B of Lazamon A has an extremely variable and uneven script: its size and neatness change frequently, perhaps affected by different states of mind (or body) from stint to stint and different conditions of his materials, especially pen cut. His minims vary greatly in the extent to which the strokes are straight or 'broken'. He did, however, make more effort than many contemporary scribes to keep the two letters <n> and <u> distinct. His most frequent form of <n> is joined clearly at the top and not at the bottom, though almost as commonly the minims are joined at top and bottom. Less often <n> lacks joining strokes at top or bottom, and a more frequent version of this *figura* has only very fine hairstrokes joining top and bottom. Occasionally the *figura* for <n> will resemble modern printed <u> the minims being joined at the foot but not at the top. Scribe B's usual *figura* for <u> is two separate minims joined neither at top nor bottom, though almost as frequently the letter has a fine joining stroke at the bottom. Much less frequently fine hairlines are apparent top and bottom. <u> never seems to occur with a top joining stroke alone like modern printed <n>. The *figura* of the medial consonant in *cu[?]es* at line 2285 has two minim strokes with the finest of hairlines joining them at top and bottom. This is a common *figura* for <n> (which is why it has previously been read as such) and a comparatively rare one for <u>, though the <u> in *garsume* 11 lines above

³⁴ 'Now you can see a marvellous tempest; and a rain filled cloud came that made the wind turn contrary, the air to blacken, the day to darken. ... The sky was disturbed, the air became black, the wind was strong, the sea trembled. Waves begin to swell and one to mount upon the other.'

³⁵ The word is at the beginning of a manuscript line and the space taken up by the present <tu> or <tic> is plausibly the same as would have been required for original <cu>.

is another example.³⁶ Even if it were argued that scribe B ‘meant’ <n> we would not be less justified in emending the letter to <u> than in emending the initial <c> to <t> especially if the reading <cuues> were to make better sense of the text than <tunes>.

OE *cȳf*, *cȳfe* (cognate with Latin *cūpa*) is a large jar, vessel or tub (cf. *MED* s.v. *kiue*, *OED* s.v. *keeve*). In Old English (*DOE* C) its main usage is given as ‘Specifically: a vessel to be filled with oil, water or wine’. Later it appears most often as a large vat for liquids and is associated with brewing, tanning or dying. Words with long /y:/ in Old English are consistently spelled with <u> by scribe B: cf. *cuðe(n)*, *cuðie*, *fuse(n)*, *hude*, *lut(e)*, *luper(e)*, *rumen*, *veen*. *cuues* would be the expected spelling for the plural of OE *cȳf* in scribe B’s writing system. The word seems never to have been of very common occurrence³⁷ and this may account for the contemporary reviser of Layamon A apparently being unfamiliar with it.³⁸ But where it does survive, *cȳf* has associations with the heating of water (Skeat, 1881: 248 line 150) and other liquids. Ælfric uses the word for the bath in which Domitian tortured St John the Evangelist in boiling oil (Crawford, 1922: 61–2 lines 1026–30):³⁹

[Domitianus] het genyman þone halgan apostol 7 on weallendum ele he het hine baðian, for ðan þe se hat ele gæð in to ðam bane; 7 him wæs eaðgete ele to þam baðe. Hig gebrohton ta Iohannem binnan þære cyfe on þam weallendan ele; ac he weare gescild þurh Godes mihte.

The keeve as burning hot vessel of torment is also found in a text more nearly contemporary to Layamon, the Hymn by Michael Kildare ‘Swet iesu hend and fre’ on fols. 9r–10r of BL Harley 913. Here the word is used metaphorically of hell’s torments: ‘For 3e beþ trenne worþi to brenne / In bittir helle kiue’.

Adopting the reading ‘cuues’ would give us the ‘rolling boil’ image that the tossing waves of the storm seem to demand: literally ‘waves rolled there as if vats were burning there’.

It might be objected that we say ‘the kettle’s boiling’ not ‘the kettle’s burning’. If the reading were indeed *cuues* we might expect a verb such as ‘weallan’, ‘sēoþan’ or

³⁶ See also fols. 29va bottom line *þus*, 69rb lines 7 and 8 from foot *wul/le*, 69vb lines 7 from foot *Bruttene* and 2 from foot *bute*, 71ra line 13 *seoluer*.

³⁷ There are only 13 occurrences listed in *DOE* and only 8 quotations in *MED* for the whole Middle English period.

³⁸ It is theoretically possible that the reviser was attempting to correct the word *cuues* to the rather more frequently used word ‘tun’. This is usually spelled with double <n> as indeed scribe B has it elsewhere in the text. ‘Tun’ is more often used for a closed vessel or ‘cask’ rather than an open vessel or ‘vat’ but sometimes it can be the equivalent of ‘cuve’ (see *MED*s.v. *tonne* n. 2 (a)) and the quotation from the *South English Legendary* below.

³⁹ Cf. also Thorpe (1844–1846: 58 line 26): ‘se [casere] het afyllan ane cyfe mid weallendum ele’.

‘boillen’ all of which were used in Middle English in similar contexts to imply not that a container itself is boiling but that its contents are (see *MED* s.v. *boillen* 1 (1); *sethen* 1 (b) and *wellen* 2 (b)). One reason for *Lazamon* to have chosen the verb *burnen*, rather than any other, is rhyme. In both examples *burnen* ‘burned’ rhymes with *urnen* ‘ran’: the word used to describe the violent rushing or rolling of the waves.⁴⁰ The use of rhyme in *Lazamon* is very irregular and not too much can therefore be made of the exigencies of rhyme for his choice of lexis. But the ME verbs ‘rennen’ and ‘brennen’ do have parallel forms in all their parts and do not share these with any other verb. The use of one in a suitable context and at the line end is therefore a strong trigger for a versifier to employ also the other if a rhyme is desired. In *Lazamon A* various forms of ‘rennen’ and ‘brennen’ rhyme with each other eight times other than in the two places under consideration here and give a strong sense of being a stock rhyming pair.⁴¹

But ‘burn’ does not have to be read as a poor substitute for ‘boil’ forced on the poet by rhyme usage. In Middle English the verb ‘brennen’ is usually reserved for dry cooking such as roasting, broiling or toasting. But ‘brennen’ can also mean ‘to be hot’ ‘to radiate heat’ (*MED* s.v. *brennen* 3 (a)). A vat has to be put on the fire and heated up before the water in it boils. This can lead to a certain amount of overlap in the usage of the two words. For the victims of torture or of the pains of hell in Middle English texts, oil or pitch is most frequently said to be *welland* or *sethand* ‘boiling’. But occasionally the verb ‘burning’ is used apparently synonymously. John the Evangelist continues to be deep-fried in Middle English texts just as he was in Old English ones. The short biblical history found in Cambridge, Trinity College 323 (fol. 42r) refers to ‘S. Iohan ewangeliste *in berninde heoli* iput’. Oil, unlike water, is a liquid which can actually ignite, but here it seems most likely that the oil is burning hot (or boiling) as it is in *Ælfric’s* versions of the story and in the version in the *South English Legendary* (D’Evelyn and Mill 1956: 595 lines 53–4): ‘Eoly he nam a tonne uol . & let it boily faste / And amidde te seopinge eoly . þe holyman me caste’. The text of *Poema Morale* in Lambeth Palace Library, MS 487 has a description of the torments of hell in which the concepts of burning and boiling also seem to overlap: ‘þer is berninde pich hore saule to bapien inne’. The use of the word

⁴⁰ The word ‘run’ could have been adopted from a version of *Wace* where *crurent* ‘swelled’ was written *current* ‘run’. See Arnold (1938: 135 note to line 2484) where the variant reading *cururent* is cited.

⁴¹ See Brook and Leslie (1963, 1978) lines 821, 2053, 3060, 6052, 6265, 6986, 7718 and 15149. Cf. also *Lazamon B* 4954 *hearnde:barnde*, where *Lazamon A* has a half rhyme: *ærnde:hærmde*. Neither verb rhymes with any other word except the proper name ‘Vortigern’.

‘bathe’ suggests that the pitch is simply boiling hot and not necessarily on fire.⁴² The image of the soul ‘burning’ in the ‘bitter keeve of hell’ in Michael Kildare’s Hymn probably implies dry roasting, but compare the image in a lyric on the Passion in BL Egerton 613, fol. 1v: ‘[ne miitte] it nowtt oyer be bote we scolden walle & wallen in helle dep’ — ‘It could not be otherwise but that we should fall and boil in the depths of hell’.

One might therefore be justified in translating the image in Lazamon, ‘waves rolled there as if vats were boiling hot’; a more explanatory paraphrase could be ‘as if vats were cooking on the fire’.⁴³ This example illustrates a case where the copying scribe probably understood what was intended in his exemplar, but where a contemporary reviser almost certainly did not. His correction therefore both fails to improve the text and misleads those following after him. Medieval editors were no more universally incompetent fools than were medieval scribes in general. But nevertheless, some were more skilled in flea-hunting than others.

(3) My third example is also from a well-known and much studied poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The poem survives in two closely related manuscripts: British Library, Cotton Caligula A.ix (hereafter C)⁴⁴ and Oxford, Jesus College MS 29, part 2 (hereafter J). It is generally accepted that neither version was copied directly from the other, but a number of shared errors indicate that the texts had a common ancestor, usually referred to

⁴² The other versions of *Poema Morale* have variants of ‘þere is pich ðe eure pealð’.

⁴³ This image is a powerful one and appears to be Lazamon’s own. I don’t want to suggest that Lazamon was not a good enough poet for the image to have occurred to him spontaneously; but one intriguing connection might be worth considering. The lines in Wace equivalent to ‘alse cuues þer burnen’ and ‘[cuu]es swulche þer burnen’ are ‘Wages crurent e reverserent’ and ‘Wages comencent a enfler’. In Godefroy’s, *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française* (1880–1902), the word ‘waghe’ (also spelled ‘wague, wa(u)cque’) is defined as ‘sorte de cuve, de tonneau ou de banne’. Judging from the references it was a Flemish word, which was only adopted into French well after Wace’s time. Godefroy has quotations from the 15th and 16th centuries linking its use with the brewing trade and also as a container for oil as well as for a system of weights for other goods. (The same word ‘vague’ survives into modern French but only as the rake used by brewers to rake out the mash of a brew.) I cannot find any evidence for its use in Middle Dutch other than as a word meaning a weight of goods or a weighing balance. From that it also comes to have the metaphorical sense of ‘a difficult or dangerous situation’. Middle Dutch *wage* is cognate with OE *wæg* (cf. *MED* s.v. *wei* n. (2)) whose meaning also seems to have been confined to weights or quantities of goods or to the scales used to weigh them rather than to the containers holding them. But there is an obvious possibility for overlap and ambiguity of usage with words of this kind (cf. *MED* s.v. *tonne* n. uses 1–3). OE *wæge* (cf. Old Saxon *wāgi*, *wēgi* ‘a vessel’) seems to have been confined in Old English use to ‘a cup’ or small container for liquids and does not appear to survive into Middle English. It would be fanciful to suppose that Lazamon (or scribe B) mistook Wace’s *wages* meaning ‘waves’ for *wages* meaning ‘vats’. Scribe B does not use in his text *waze/wawe*, the Middle English equivalent of the French word *wage* ‘wave’, preferring the word ‘uthe’ from OE *ȝþ*. However, it is possible that he knew the word: *wæg*, ‘wave’ also goes back to Old English. Indeed, could Lazamon (or even scribe B himself — the phrase is not in the Otho text on either occasion and may not be original) have known both meanings of the word from Flemish or Dutch and had the image of ‘une sorte de cuve’ triggered by the homonym?

⁴⁴ In the present paper the siglum C refers to the second part of the Cotton manuscript, from fols. 195r–261v, and not to the first part which contains Lazamon A in two different hands.

as X. It is also generally accepted that the scribe of C was a literatim copyist who faithfully transmitted the text of X (Breier 1910: 49–51; Atkins 1922: xxix–xxx). From the evidence of the C scribe, X was evidently in two distinct types of language, X1 and X2 (perhaps reflecting two different scribes), which are transmitted literatim by the C scribe as C1 and C2. The scribe of J, in contrast, not only translated the language of X into his own kind of language, but also showed considerable freedom in textual adaptation and editing (Atkins 1922: xxvii; Grattan and Sykes 1935: xvi; Stanley 1960: 6).⁴⁵

It follows that where the C and J texts substantively differ, the C text is likely to reflect more closely what was in X and, by implication, the original text. Literatim copyists, such as the C scribe, want their copy to make sense, but as long as they themselves understand the text of their exemplar, there is no pressure for them to change it. Even when something in his exemplar makes no sense to him, a literatim copyist is more likely, rather than emending it, to replicate exactly what he (thinks he) sees. In places where the exemplar is difficult or unclear, ‘editing’ scribes (such as the J scribe) tend, by contrast, to ‘improve’ the text so as to make sense to themselves. This was the J scribe’s general practice in all the texts that he copied.⁴⁶ In my present example, however, the J scribe apparently had such difficulty with the reading in X that he uncharacteristically left a blank in place of the problem word. A later reviser supplies a reading that makes good sense but is quite different from the C scribe’s text.

The example comes well into the debate between the two birds when the argument is in full flow. The nightingale is temporarily at her wits’ end for an answer to the owl’s charge that she can only do one thing and that apart from singing she is completely useless. The nightingale proceeds in retaliation to make a virtue of this single talent and for 40 lines (707–746) she claims greater value for her singing than all the owl’s abilities put together and offers to go to the papal court for endorsement of this view. At this point it seems as if the Owl makes to come back at her, because the Nightingale, hardly drawing breath says:

Ac abid 3ete nopeles
Bu shalt ihere an oper pes.

⁴⁵ For a summary see also Laing (1998: 276–8).

⁴⁶ C and J share seven texts all of which are presumed also to have been in X. They are (in the order they appear in C) *Josaphaz*, the *Set Dormanz*, the *Petit Plet*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Long Life or Death's Wither-Clench*, *An Orison to Our Lady*, *Doomsday*, *The Latemest Day*, *The Ten Abuses*, the *Lutel Soth Sermun*. The two manuscripts may also have shared *Will and Wit* which now survives only in C. J includes in addition 20 other items not in C, including *Poema Morale*, *The Sayings of St Bede*, the *Luue Ron* of Friar Thomas de Hales, *The Proverbs of Alfred* and *The XI Pains of Hell*.

Ne shaltu for engelonde.
At bisse worde me atstonde.⁴⁷

She then launches into a further 86 lines (751–836) of argument on the superiority of skill and wisdom over mere brute strength.

The problem reading is the word *pes*. The initial figura is in the form of wynn, although it lacks a dot — a device frequently adopted by the C scribe to help distinguish the *figura* of wynn from that of thorn.⁴⁸ As it stands the reading seems not to make sense and there have been almost as many solutions suggested as there are editors of the poem.⁴⁹ Recourse to the reading in J, whose text does occasionally supply a truer reading than C, seems to offer little help. The J scribe apparently began to modify the line, substituting the word *abyde* for C's *ihere*;⁵⁰ but he then left a gap instead of the final word, omitting also the punctum that usually closes the line, perhaps intending to return to the problem. He never did so, and a later hand added the word *bles*. This reading gives good sense — 'another blast' is exactly what the Owl is then subjected to by the Nightingale — and the word also provides a true rhyme on *nopeles* (cf. OE *læs* / *blæs*). But we can assume no authority for the reading from X only that *bles* is 'a guess on the part of [the] later scribe' (Atkins 1922: 64, cf. Stanley 1960: 121).

We are thrown back on C's reading with the knowledge firstly that C does usually preserve a reading closer to X than J does, and secondly (and very importantly) that there was enough odd about the reading in X to cause the J scribe trouble. There have been three approaches to C's reading: those who read the problem word as *pes*; those who read it as *pes*; and those who opt to emend the reading and substitute something else. The first approach has so far led to solutions that carry little conviction. They are summarised by Atkins (1922: 64): 'Neither of the two interpretations proposed, viz. (1) "in a different manner" (O.E. *wīs*, *wīse*), (2) "in another strain" (ON *vīsa*) is satisfactory, on account of the defective rhyme that would result'.

⁴⁷ 'But wait yet nevertheless thou shalt hear another [?]. And thou shalt not at this speech withstand me for all England.'

⁴⁸ Wynn is often, but not always, dotted and occasionally the scribe also dots thorn. Cartlidge (forthcoming) considers that the two figurae may well have been difficult to distinguish also in X and cites as evidence the J scribe's mistaken *Hwat* for 'that' line 404 and at line 943 his subpunction of a partly written <w> for following correct <p> in the word *lope*. I am grateful to Neil Cartlidge for showing me a prepublication draft of his forthcoming edition and for much useful discussion about the poem.

⁴⁹ *The Owl and the Nightingale* has been edited by Wells (1907), Atkins (1922), Grattan and Sykes (1935), Stanley (1960). For earlier and partial editions see Atkins (1922: 182).

⁵⁰ Perhaps influenced by the imperative *abid* in the previous line.

The second approach involves taking the initial *figura* as thorn rather than *wynn*. Palaeographically this is perfectly feasible. The *figurae* for the two *litterae* in C represent a cline of shapes formally distinguishable at each end (Grattan and Sykes 1935: xii) but not in the middle (Stanley 1960: 9–10). Reading *pes* requires only to acknowledge that <þ> can frequently have a <p>-like shape in this hand. The reading has been interpreted by Wrenn (1932: 170–1) as being from an unrecorded Old Kentish form, **pes* of an unrecorded OE **pys* ‘storm’ (cf. ON *pyss*) but this is dismissed by Stanley (1957: 40–1) as a ghost word. More plausible is the reading first suggested by Stratmann (1887: 212) and favoured by Gadow (1909: 220), Stanley (1960: 121) and Cartlidge (forthcoming). They take *pes* to be the genitive singular of the demonstrative pronoun and translate: ‘you shall hear something else about this’. The reading is unexceptionable palaeographically and phonologically. The C scribe’s writing system allows the initial *figura* to be <þ> and *pes:les* (< OE *pes/læ̃s*)⁵¹ would provide a true rhyme on /ɛ/ assuming *læ̃s* to be a variant with shortened vowel. Syntactically, however, this reading has less to recommend it, and I find myself in agreement with Atkins (1922: 64) that the solution is ‘palpably forced’.⁵² Its supporters adduce two parallels in the poem:

1441 Hit nuste neuwer hpat hit was.
 Forþi hit þohte fondi þas.⁵³

and

881 Hon longeþ honne noþeles.
 Þat boþ her po is hom þes.⁵⁴

Although the second example confirms the presence of a short vowel variant of *-les*,⁵⁵ in neither case is the syntax truly parallel to our problem line. The first harks back to Old English usage where the complement of the transitive verb *fandian* could be in accusative, dative or genitive case. The second is an example of the survival in Middle English of an Old English impersonal construction with adverbial use of the word ‘woe’

⁵¹ The choice of Old English etymon for *pes* depends on the choice of dialectal variants. If the ‘original’ dialect were south-eastern we would expect the word to go back to earlier *pes*. The West-Midland dialect of both C and J scribes would have *pes* as the result of Second Fronting. If the original dialect were of Dorset one might expect *þas* from West-Saxon *þæs* (cf. *þas* in line 1442 below).

⁵² The use of *an-oþer* as a substantive ‘another thing’, although it may sound odd to modern ears is not the problem; the usage is not uncommon in Middle English and Stanley cites another example from line 903 of *O&N*.

⁵³ ‘She never knew what it [i.e. the game of love] was, therefore she thought to make trial of it.’

⁵⁴ ‘They long [to go] hence nonetheless [lit. it longs for them hence], that [they] are here woe is them of that.’

⁵⁵ The only other rhyme on *-les* in the poem is *res* with /ɛ/ (< OE *ræ̃s*) ‘a rush, assault’, line 512.

and with dative of person and genitive of cause (see Bosworth-Toller 1898 s.v. *wá*). The construction was evidently known to the J scribe who met it in almost identical form also in his version of *The XI Pains of Hell*:

Ac *trichurs*. & *lyeres*. and *les*;
 Þat weren her. wo is ham þes.⁵⁶

The same construction may be found in *Lazamon*, both with ‘woe’ and also with the word ‘well’, used in a similar way:

Liððen þa leoden; tat heo on londe comen.
 æt dertemuðe i totenes; wel wes Brutus þes.⁵⁷

It is noticeable that when the demonstrative pronoun is used in the genitive in Middle English, whether in impersonal constructions like these or in other contexts, it always refers to some specified object, event or situation. In our problem line there is no specified referent.⁵⁸ Moreover, if it were a non-problematic construction in early Middle English, and seen to be like the ‘parallels’ cited by its modern supporters, why did the J scribe reject it? There must have been something about the word that puzzled him. There are two possible reasons I can think of: (1) he did not consider such a reading to be grammatically well formed; (2) (and this does not preclude (1)) the reading in X did not have as its initial *figura* a clear thorn or even a hard to distinguish thorn-cum-wynn, but a clear wynn or perhaps a <w>. Such a reading in X would result in the the C version’s *pes*, written by the literatim copyist, who strongly prefers wynn to <w>, but it could well have thrown the J scribe if he did not understand the word being represented.

Using our knowledge of the writing systems of both C and J, we may be able to preserve the reading without resorting to the third approach; that is, to emend what is considered a ‘scribal error’ by the C scribe.⁵⁹ The types of language preserved in both the C text and the J text show evidence of the voicing of initial [f] in words of native

⁵⁶ ‘But those who were traitors and liars and false here, woe is them of that.’ See Morris (1872: 153 lines 207–8). The version in Digby 86, fol. 133vb is similar: Ac *trichours* þey weren and les, sopliche I saye wo is hem þes. Note that here a word with OE /æ:ɑ/ (*lēas*) rhymes with a word with OE short /e/ (*þes*).

⁵⁷ ‘The peopled sailed until they came to land at Dartmouth in Totnes; well was Brutus of that.’ (See Brook and Leslie 1963: lines 894–5 and cf. parallels at lines 1371 and 2987.)

⁵⁸ See the usages listed in *MED* s.v. *thas* pron. 1a. (anaphoric usage) and 1b. (cataphoric usage). The present example from *The Owl and the Nightingale* is the only one without a clear referent.

⁵⁹ Atkins (1922: 64) solution is to emend to *hes* (< OE *hās*) ‘a judicial pronouncement’. This would give a correct rhyme and picks up the legal phraseology elsewhere in the poem. But the birds have not yet gone to judgement and are still arguing their respective cases. Grattan and Sykes (1935: 23) suggests *res* (< OE *rēs*) ‘a rush, attack’. This emendation makes better sense than Atkins’s but it is perhaps harder to imagine what kind of malformation of <r> in X or in a precursor could have been misread as <w>, <p> or <þ>.

origin.⁶⁰ Such words are frequently written with initial <u/v> implying [v]: e.g. ‘Vor tat hi nelleþ to uor [J veor] go’ (line 673). In common with the usage of many SW Midland scribes in early Middle English, the language of the C text, especially that of C1, also occasionally shows orthographic equivalence of the symbols <w>, <v>, <u> and <p>, which may be used interchangeably for [w], [v] and [u].⁶¹ The C scribe generally prefers <p> to <w> for its usual *potestas* [w], but he has *w* for [v] (from earlier ‘f’) four times in the word ‘foul’ from OE *fūl*: *wole* 8; *wl* 31, 236; *wle* 35.⁶² It is clear that at these points in the text X must have had initial *w*. This is betrayed in two of the instances by the J scribe, who ‘translates’ what is evidently usage alien to him to his own preferred form *ful* at lines 31 and 236 but who preserves *wle* at line 35 and at line 8 reads the form in X as a variant of the word ‘evil’ and translates to *vuele*. C has *w* for [v] from Old English ‘f’ at line 17 in the word *waste*: *In ore waste picke hegge*. That *waste* is from OE *fæst* ‘dense, impenetrable’ is confirmed by J, where the scribe again converts what must have been a spelling with <p/w> in X to *vaste*, his own preferred spelling. One further clear example⁶³ of *w* for [v] occurs at line 637 where C has *iwrne* and J *iwurne*, from the Old English adverb *gefyrn*, ‘formerly, long ago’ (see MED s.v. *fern* adv.) in the phrase *of olde iw(u)rne* ‘from the olden days’.

It is evident that the text of the *Owl and the Nightingale* in X had occasional instances of <w> for [v] or [vu]. Judging from their infrequent occurrence in the literatim copy by the C scribe, such spellings were almost certainly minority forms in X. We have no means of knowing whether they formed part of the spontaneous usage of the C scribe, but they were certainly not the preferred usage of the J scribe. The use of *p/w* for [v] was nevertheless widespread in other orthographies in the SW Midlands at this period.⁶⁴ <p/w>-spellings in X were retained by the C scribe, either because he was familiar with the usage, and saw no reason to change it or because his instincts towards literatim copying were stronger than any urge to adapt them. The scribe of J must certainly have had some familiarity with the usage because he three times accurately

⁶⁰ For a fuller discussion and references see Laing (1998: 278–80).

⁶¹ For examples see Scahill (1997: 4 and fn. 2) and for discussion and further references Laing (1998: 279 fn. 19).

⁶² In the last three instances, <w> stands for [vu]. This is an extension of the system that allows two symbols to be written for one sound <uu> or <vv> for [w]. The corollary is that one symbol <p> or <w> (which was originally two, i.e. two ligatured <u/v>s — ‘double-u’) may be written for two e.g. [wu], or as here [vu]. For further discussion and examples see Benskin (1982: 19–20 and forthcoming) and Laing (1998: 279 fn. 19 and 1999).

⁶³ I consider there to have been one other instance in the C text at line 115 (Laing 1998).

⁶⁴ One extreme example is scribe A of Cambridge Trinity College B.14.39 (323) for which see Laing (1999: 258, 260).

converts the <p/w>-spellings to his own preferred *f*- or *v*-spellings. Where he fails to convert the text the <w>-spellings may indicate rare lapses by the scribe into literatim copying, or that he accepted the forms as part of his passive repertoire of possible spellings.

It follows that the C scribe's *p/pes* in line 748 could be read as a variant spelling for [ve:s] perhaps from earlier *fæ̃s or *fēas.⁶⁵ *MED* lists fēse n. (variant spellings vese, veze, wese) and defines it 'a blast, a rush'. We have a word with precisely the required meaning:

Ac abid yete nopeles

Pu shalt ihere an oþer pes.

'But wait yet nevertheless thou shalt hear another blast.'

Although the sense in context, the syntax and the reading from the C scribe's orthographic system all fit perfectly, we are not quite home and dry. The noun is very unusual in Middle English and (with only two recorded instances in *MED*, both from considerably later than *The Owl and the Nightingale*) it is a rare survivor. Rarity is what we might expect from the J scribe's apparent ignorance of the word and we must not seek to discredit it as a possible reading for that reason. But it does mean that we have very little information about its phonology and this becomes of interest when rhyming usage is at stake. If we are to achieve a 'pure' rhyme with *-les* < OE *læ̃s*, the accented vowel in 'fese' ought to be /ɛ:/.

The noun is not recorded in Old English, only a related verb, to which *MED* s.v. fēsen v. gives the definitions 1(a) drive or chase; spur (a horse); incite (to action); (b) put to flight, rout (an enemy); discomfit. 2(a) Pursue so as to frighten or terrify; frighten, terrify; (b) prosecute, punish. *MED* gives no direct etymology but compares A[n]glian *fēsan* WS *fýsan* (from *fīesan).⁶⁶ We would expect the Anglian etymology to result in /ɛ:/ in Middle English. The two recorded instances of the noun in Middle English would seem to confirm /ɛ:/ as the accented vowel. The first is from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, lines 1985–6: 'And ther out cam a rage and swich a veze [vrr. wese, veze] that it made al the gate for to rese'. Chaucer is here bringing to life the wall painting depicting the

⁶⁵ If we take *-les* in line 747 to have a shortened vowel (cf. line 882) we could also consider a Middle English continuation from OE *fæ̃s* 'a fringe, hem'. But although this survives into Middle English, mainly referring to the fringelike roots of the leek plant (*MED* s.v. *fas* n.) it is a non-starter for sense.

⁶⁶ There is some difference of opinion here between *MED* and *OED*. *OED* s.v. Feeze v.¹ takes the verb to be from 'OE *fēsian* (? also *fēsan*), *fýsian* to drive, corresponds to ON. **feysa* (mod. Norwegina *föysa*, Sw. *fösa*), app. :- **fausjójan*, *fausjan*.' and to be 'Totally unconnected with OE *fýsan* (:- **funsjan*) to hurry'.

temple of Mars. The scene is darkly violent, stormy and menacing and in these two lines Chaucer produces not only what has been referred to (Elliot 1974: 107) as ‘a unique noise’ with the rushing blast of *veze*, but also a most unusual rhyme with *rese* (< OE *hrisian*, *hrysan*, *hrissan*) ‘to shake, tremble’. Chaucer uses neither word anywhere else in his surviving works. *MED* s.v. *rēsen* v. cites no other examples of the word in rhyme and *OED* (s.v. *Rese* v.² considers that ‘the phonology of the Eng[lish] forms is not quite clear’. In Chaucer’s time the lengthening of OE /i/ in an open syllable had not happened outside the North and North Midlands, so the origin of his spelling a mystery. The later Middle English examples however are presumably from open syllable lengthening which we would expect to result in /e:/. The entry in *MED* only cites a possible variant in /e:/ with a query, so there remains some doubt of the quality of the vowel.

The other example cited of the noun ‘fese’ in *MED* is in the phrase ‘bi fese’ meaning ‘in haste, forthwith’. It occurs in a manuscript of ca. 1450 containing medical recipes in rhyming verse and placed in *LALME* as LP 4665 in Norfolk:⁶⁷

p. 300 line 220 Take a porcyown of fresche chese
 And wynd it in hony al bewese

The rhyme on ‘cheese’ would again suggest /e:/ for the accented vowel until one looks at the rest of the verses in this hand and discovers that rhymes on words with OE /æ:/ or /æ:a/ and OE /e:/ are commonplace.⁶⁸ Such exiguous evidence as there is for the phonology of the noun ‘fese’ points to probable /e:/ as its accented vowel but does not absolutely preclude /ε:/.

If we return to the verb from which the noun may be derived, things look a little different. *MED* says: ‘ME rimes show open ē (from unmutated OE *fēas-), which is reflected in such MnE dial[ect] forms as *faise*, *fease*, *vaze*, *vease*’.⁶⁹ We can postulate an /ε:/ variant also for the noun. If this were granted it would give a pure rhyme with *-les*; the *Owl and the Nightingale* similarly rhymes words with OE *ēa* and OE *æ*² in lines 177-8:

ac lete we awei þos cheste.

⁶⁷ Stockholm Royal Library, X.90 for which see Holthausen (1896).

⁶⁸ E.g. *clene* (< OE *clāne* with *æ*²) rhymes with *grene* (< OE *grēne*), *wene* (< OE *wēnan*), *tene* (< OE *tēona*) and *betwene* (< OE *betwēonan*); *grete* (< OE *grēat*) rhymes with *swete* (< OE *swēte*).

⁶⁹ *EDD* s.v. *fease* v.¹ cites spellings from modern dialectal usage in *vaise* (for both verb and noun, cf. also *veaze* for the noun) from Devon, *vaze* from Gloucs, Somerset and Devon, *vease* from Somerset and Devon and *veass* from Devon beside spellings also in *-(e)e-* from Devon, Somerset and Gloucs.

vor suiche wordes boþ unwerste. [J vnwreste]⁷⁰

If not then we would have to assume a less than perfect rhyme on /ɛ:/ and /e:/.

I leave this example with a quotation from E.G. Stanley (1988: 53):

My impression is that *The Owl and the Nightingale* is far less exact than Chaucer's poetry in rhyming. The early history of English rhyming poetry should make one cautious about emending to introduce purer rhymes into an early Middle English poem. Certain licences were very common, especially assonances and impure rhymes in words with dissyllabic endings. But impurities of all kinds occur from time to time. It is usually easy to emend them away; so easy that many a scribe did so. This is a temptation to be resisted.

I think we have established that there is no need to emend the C scribe's text in this instance. Instead we must choose between two readings: *þes* for the genitive of the demonstrative pronoun from OE *þæs* and *pes* for 'ves' from OE **fēs* or **fēas* or from some early Middle English verbal form in either /e:/ or /ɛ:/. The readings are equally plausible orthographically as possible spellings within the C scribe's system. The choice is between a reading that is phonologically unexceptionable, makes reasonable sense but is dubious syntactically and one that involves an apparently rare word, which makes excellent sense and provides perfect syntax, but for which a pure rhyme cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt. It must be remembered that the former interpretation was apparently not acceptable to the J scribe. I offer the latter as a possibility, which I believe merits serious consideration.

The three fleas I have so far attempted to catch are of a genus that Housman himself would have recognised. With recourse to observations of scribal behaviour and writing systems, they offer textual solutions that purport to be 'best text' readings. They imply in each case that the suggested reading was what the author intended, or at least was what may have been in some textual archetype long lost. All three therefore purport to be 'original' readings in both senses ((a)-type and (b)-type) defined on pp. 6–7 above. In the first example only one version of the text survives. In the second and third, only one of the two surviving versions in each case provides complete witness to the reading. In this sense they were uncomplicated examples.

(4) My fourth and final example is of a different kind. It does not pretend to offer an original reading of an (a)-type, only to claim for a particular scribal version that it may

⁷⁰ Such rhymes would be normal outside the South-East. The rhymes words in this example are however candidates for precluster shortening. The results of such shortening *would* possibly give a pure rhyme in Kentish: OK /æ:/ > /e:/ > MK /e/ > /ɛ/ and OK /æ:ɑ/ > /ɛ:/ > MK /ɛ/. Outside the South-East shortening would give an impure rhyme: OE (not Kentish) /æ:/ > /æ/ > ME /a/ and OE /æ:ɑ/ > /ɛ:/ > /ɛ/.

represent plausible early Middle English usage as opposed to nonsensical corruption. The example is taken from one version of another well-known and much studied poem, *The Proverbs of Alfred* (*P of A*). This poem survives in four manuscript versions: BL Cotton Galba A xix⁷¹ (C12b2–13a1) hereafter C; Maidstone Museum A.13, fol. 93r (C13a) hereafter M; Cambridge, Trinity College B.14.39 (323) fols. 85r–87v (C13b2) hereafter T; and Oxford, Jesus College 29, fols. 189r–192r (C13b2) hereafter J. My illustration is from the T manuscript, which is described by Arngart in his parallel text edition (1955: 49) in the following terms:

Textually, T is the worst of all the copies and in considerable need of revision. Yet it is of particular value first as being the sole authority for a large proportion of the *Proverbs*, and secondly because, despite much corruption it sometimes contains readings superior even to those of C and M.

The scribe of T gets criticism from all quarters. He is a scribe who is perceived to suffer from what I have elsewhere called (Laing 1999: 259) ‘the “confused Norman” syndrome’. The diagnosis was first proposed by Skeat in his edition of *P of A* (1907 xiv–xxii):⁷²

The scribe must have been a Norman, who no doubt did his best to reproduce an old copy which he had before him; but his knowledge of English was so slight that he did not even know the value of the English characters.

Numerous ‘scribal errors’, ‘sounds misrepresented’ and ‘noticeable errors of an exceptional kind’ are listed by Skeat from the T scribe’s text. These can hardly represent, however, the chaotic garbling of a French-born monoglot scribe. They are better explained as the results of profligate use of the mixture of spelling conventions available to a scribe for the copying of English. In 13th-century England this mixture would have included the knowledge of sound–symbol correspondences in the writing traditions of Latin and French as well as possible familiarity with Old English spellings. Some Middle English scribes, such as Orm or the designer of AB language, had an unusually economical and consistent approach towards the mapping of sound on symbol. Others, such as the T scribe of *P of A*, employed systems that were far from economical. Such scribes may have a number of different literal substitution sets from which to draw for

⁷¹ Only three leaves of this manuscript survived the Cottonian fire of 1731, but the fragmentary text may be supplemented in places by transcripts of extracts made before the fire by James, Wanley and Spelman.

⁷² The comments in Skeat’s edition are based on a paper given by him to the Philological Society in 1897 and published in *The Transactions of the Philological Society* (1895–9), 339–418. See also Greg (1910: 282–285).

the representation of particular sounds.⁷³ The systems they used were complex but they were not chaotic.⁷⁴ In the case of the T scribe of *P of A* many of the supposedly necessary emendations are arguably not needed.⁷⁵

My present example is from lines 334–340 in Arngart’s edition (1955: 108–9). All four manuscript texts are running at this point. C and M are very similar and seem likely to be closely related textually. J gives a somewhat different text, which gives both better sense and a tighter sequence of verses (Arngart 1955: 174–5).

⁷³ The T scribe of *P of A*, for instance, uses the *litterae* <u>/<v>/<w>/<p>/<ɣ>/<pu> interchangeably for the *potestates* [u]/[v]/[w]/[wu]. (Note that the *figurae* for wynn and thorn are identical in this script, so the following examples give a false impression of differentiation between, say, *þif* ‘give’ and *pel* ‘well’ which might more accurately be transcribed as either *pif* and *pel* or *þif* and *þel*.) Compare for instance: *pel*, *wel*, *vel* ‘well’ adv.; *pole*, *pile*, *uole*, *pel(l)e*, *pille*, *wille*, *ville* ‘will’ 1st/3rd sg. pres. ind.; *pis(e)*, *wis*, *zise* ‘wise’; *perld(e)*, *world*, *porolde*, *perelde*, *zerlde* ‘world’; *eu(e)re*, *euu(e)re*, *eper*, *heuir*, *hepere* ‘ever’; *haue*, *hape* ‘have’; *hauedest*, *heuедest*, *heze[de]*, *nepedest* ‘had’ pret. sg. *hepit* ‘head’; *pe*, *we*, *ve* ‘we’; *ur(e)*, *pure* ‘our’; *pere*, *were*, *puere* ‘were’; *puidepis* ‘widows’; *-purþ*, *wrd*, *wrþ-*; *p(h)u*, *zu*, ‘how’; *(h)po*, *vam* ‘who(m)’; and cf. e.g. *þif*, *zef* ‘give’; *þaf*, *þef* ‘gave’; *þe*, *ze* ‘ye’. Another substitution set is the interchangeable use of <ng>/<nk> for final and medial [ŋg] (though not for [ŋk] which seems always to be written <nk>) and the additional possibilities of <nc> in final position and <nh> in medial position; compare *-ing/-inke* vbl. sb.; *king*, *kinc*, *kinhis* ‘king(s)’; *þing*, *þinke*, *þinges*, *þinhes* ‘thing(s)’; *long(e)*, *lonke* ‘long’; *wrong*, *pronke* ‘wrong’; *tunke* ‘tongue’. The most profligate set of substitutions are those employed in words with or palatal or velar fricative [ç~x] with following [t] in words spelled with *-ht* in Old English. This set shows interchangeable use of <ct>/<st>/<t>/<th>/<ch>/<cht>/<dt>/<tht>/<tt>/<t>/<d>; compare e.g. *brit* ‘bright’; *dristin*, *drittin*, *driehen*, *drihten*, < OE *dryhten* ‘lord’; *litht*, *licte* ‘light’; *mestes*, *mitht*, *mist*, *michte*, *mistin* ‘might’ vb. pret.; *miste(n)* ‘might’ sb.; *riht*, *rid* ‘right’; *widht*, *wid* ‘wight’; *(h)achte*, *(h)acte* < OE *æht* ‘property’; *taite*, *tahte* ‘taught’ pret.; *þochte* ‘thought’ pret.; *þoch* ‘thought’ ppl. Note that these examples include forms not only from the T scribe’s text of *P of A* but also from the text the same scribe copies on fols. 81v–82r.

⁷⁴ For a fuller discussion and references see Laing (1999).

⁷⁵ For two examples see Laing (1999: 267–68).

C	M	J
mani appel is uten grene briht on beme & bitter pið-innen so is mani pimman in hire fader bure. scene under scete. & þoh he is scondes ful. so is mani gadeling godelice on horsse; bold bi glede & unpurð at neode.	Mani appel is uten grene briht on beme. & biter piþ-innen. So is manni pimman; in hire fader bure; scene under scete & þoh hoe is scondes ful. So is mani gadelig godeliche on horse. plonc op his stede; and un-purþ at þe nude.	Mony appel is bryht wit-vte. and Bitter wiþ-inne. So is mony wymmon. on hyre fader bure. Schene vnder schete. and þeyh heo is schendful. So is mony gedelyng. godlyche on horse. and is þeyh lutel wurp. wlonk bi þe glede and vuel at þare neode

These texts may be translated: ‘Many an apple is green [J: bright] on the outside, [bright on tree] and bitter on the inside. So is many a woman in her father’s house, beautiful under sheet, and yet she is full of shame [J: shameful]. So is many a fellow, splendid on his horse, [J: and yet is worth little] proud [C: bold] by the fireside [M: upon his steed] and worthless [J: evil] at time of need’.

In spite of its slightly later date, Arngart considers the J text to have ‘better’ readings in general — and therefore to be closer to the presumed original — than the other surviving texts (Arngart 1955: 38–49). Given the J scribe’s habit of editorial emendation in the other texts that he copies, it could however, be argued that he systematically ‘improved’ the text of an exemplar he considered inferior, whether or not it reflected an earlier version of the text. Whatever may be the relative merits of the C, M and J texts, at this point the T version differs:

T
Moni appel is pid-uten grene.
brit on beme.
& bittere pidinnen.
So his moni pimmon
in hire faire bure.
Schene under schete.
& [p/þ]ocke hie is in an stondes pile.
Spo is moni gadeling
godelike on horse.
planc on perþe;
& unpurþ on pike

‘Many an apple is green on the outside, bright on tree, and bitter on the inside. So is many a woman in her fair bower, beautiful under sheet, and [?] she is in a little while. So is many a fellow, splendid on his horse, proud on his beast,⁷⁶ and worthless in his office.’

⁷⁶ From OE *weorf*, with <y> substituting for <w/w> for [v]. See the litteral substitutions in fn. 68 above. No emendation is necessary.

The line ‘*in hire faire bure*’ in T corresponds to ‘*in hire fader bure*’ in the other versions. Two lines later the difference in T is more far-reaching. The word *[p/p]ocke* has been transcribed in this way because in the T scribe’s script <p> and <p> are identical in shape. It is important not to discount the possibility that what has been taken to be a thorn in this word could equally well be *wynn*. In this script <y>, while distinct in shape, also alternates functionally with <p/p> so in principle we have to consider the possibility that the word might begin with the *potestas* [θ], [w] or [j].

[p/p]ocke in T seems to correspond textually to the adverb ‘though’ in the other versions, which then follow with ‘she is full of shame, shameful’. Previous editors of *P of A* have all read the word in T as *pocke* and have taken it to be a variant of ‘though’. The following phrase in T is then assumed to be a textual corruption. Skeat (1907) emends *pocke* to *poh* and adds *schondes ful*, letting in *an stondes pile* stand as the following line. Arngart (1955: 175) calls in *an stondes pile* a ‘preposterous perversion’ and takes it to be a ‘scribal error’ for *scondes ful*. Whether T’s exemplar had a version, either badly written or already somewhat corrupted, of some form of the phrase ‘yet she is shameful’, or whether T’s text reflects a different textual tradition is uncertain. But as students of scribal systems, whether dialectologists, editors or lexicographers, what we must probe is what the T scribe himself thought he was copying. It is not good enough to say that the text is ‘a preposterous perversion’. The preposterousness depends on what it is a perversion of; and in any case we want to know what it means *here*.⁷⁷

Scribes and copyists want their texts to make sense, at least to themselves and to their contemporary readers. If a scribe is decoding his copy-text from an exemplar written in a complex writing system he may sometimes be at a loss as to the meaning. He will then usually try to make sense of the text in terms of his own system. Only as a last resort will he copy exactly what is in front of him without understanding it — rather as we might trace an indecipherable name or address on an envelope in the hope that the postman’s palaeographical expertise may be better than ours.

Whether textual criticism is to be termed an art or a science, the process must combine the recognition of what is formally possible with what is textually plausible. The spelling

⁷⁷ The ‘preposterous perversion’ argument can work both ways. The collocation *scondes ful* is unrecorded except in the C and M versions of *P of A*. J’s *schendful* occurs more frequently and is probably an editorial answer to the textual anomaly on the part of the J scribe. If the exemplar or original (at however many removes) behind the texts of T, M and C had <f>/<v>/<w>/<p> equivalence and the common scribal interchange in the *figurae* for <c> and <t>, some form such as **stondes pule* could easily have led to the (mis)reading similar to *scondes ful*. We might conjecture that the exemplar text could have read ‘[p/w]ocke h[o]e is an stondes [p/w]ule’.

þocke is not recorded anywhere else in Middle English. How plausibly can it be read as a form for ‘though’? Formally it is just about possible in this scribe’s very profligate writing system; but we must invoke a complex array of orthographic equivalences. In the T scribe’s usage ‘though’ appears in the variant forms *þau* (3x), *þoch* (2x), *þech* (1x) *þaut* (1x) and *þauc* (1x).⁷⁸ <ck>, <k> and (in final position) <c> are used by the T scribe to indicate /k/: e.g. *folck*, *folkes* ‘folk’; *loke* ‘look’; *maken* ‘make’, *ac* ‘but’, *clerc*, *cleric* ‘clerk’. The <c> and <k> together seem strongly to imply /k/, the only other examples in this hand being in the words *stickes* (< OE *sticca*), *cocken* ‘to quarrel’ and *cocker* ‘quarreler’ (cf. OE *cocc*). <ck> does not elsewhere indicate a velar or palatal fricative as implied by the T scribe’s <-ch>-spellings for ‘though’, far less zero as implied by *þau* where the earlier fricative has been lost. The spelling *þauc* may however provide at least an orthographic parallel to support *þocke*.⁷⁹ The presence of spellings in *þoch* and *þauc* suggests the possibility of an analogous spelling **þoc*. If <c> in final position is the equivalent of <k> and <ck> (whatever the *potestas* implied) then **þok(e)* and **þock(e)* are feasible by extension.⁸⁰

It might be possible to accept *þocke* as an unusual spelling for ‘though’; but it would only be plausible if it made grammatical sense in context. In T’s text as it stands the word cannot be taken for the adverb ‘though, yet’, because the sentence construction does not allow it: ‘So is many a woman in her fair bower, beautiful under sheet, and [something] she is in a little while’. The meaning requires an adjective and one with pejorative connotations.

We have already established that in the T scribe’s usage the problem word may feasibly be read *þocke*, *wocke* or, by substitution, *þocke*. *þocke* and *þocke* (as adjectives) are I believe non-starters.⁸¹ There remains only the possibility of reading *þocke*. The simplest solution is to take *þocke* as a spelling for ‘weak’ from OE *wāc*. The T scribe uses the word

⁷⁸ The phonetic implications of <þ> and <c> in the last two examples are debatable; *MED* s.v. *though* conj. suggests that in general ‘forms in -t and -th(e) may have been influenced by ON (cp. *OI þōt(t)*, contr. of *þō at*) or perh. derived from the OE comb. *þēah þe*. The only other words having final palatal or velar fricative in Old English that are recorded by the T scribe are *inoch* (2x) ‘enough’; *nei* (2x) ‘nigh’ and *þurch* (3x), *þuru* (3x), *þuruch* (1x), *þuruh* (1x), *þurut* (1x) ‘through’.

⁷⁹ The *þauc* spelling seems clear but is also, as far as I know, not recorded for ‘though’ elsewhere in Middle English. The T scribe, unlike many others of the period, had distinct symbols for <þ> and <c>, but even those who seem to have the means to keep the letters distinct do often appear to use either shape interchangeably and it is possible that *þauc* goes back to *þaut* in the T scribe’s exemplar (though from this argument it must be admitted that *þaut* could equally well go back to *þauc*).

⁸⁰ For post-consonantal final <-e> in ‘though’ at this period cf. *ðoge* in *Genesis and Exodus* and in later Middle English, numerous examples amongst the 459 spellings for ‘though’ recorded in *LALME*.

⁸¹ *þocke* is a plausible spelling for ‘yoke’ but would make no sense. As for *þocke*, there is a rare adjective ‘thoke’ of uncertain origin first recorded in *OED* from *Promptorium Parvulorum* with the meaning ‘infirm’ or ‘unsound’ but apparently only in the sense of squishy fish. There is an uncertain reading in the Winchester MS of *Promptorium Parvulorum*, (*MED* s.v. *thoke* adj.: ‘Cowerde, herteles, long choke [read: thoke]’; but the definition ‘cowardly’ does not fit our semantic case either. Later dialect citations of the word appear to be for ‘sluggish’ and ‘idle’.

in two other places in *P of A* in neither of which are the other three texts running. At lines 544–5 he writes: *min plite is pan. & min herte poc*, ‘my face is pale and my heart weak’ and at lines 559–60 *& þe poke ginne þu coueren þe pronke ginne þu risten*, ‘and the weak do thou shield, the wrong do thou set right’. Given the orthographic equivalence in this scribe’s system of <k> <ck> and final <c> implying [k] it seems reasonable to read *pocke* also as the word ‘weak’ from OE *wāc*.

There might be two formal objections raised. The first is the presence of final *-e* implying an inappropriate use in this context of the weak declension of the adjective. At this period, however, the distinction between the strong and weak declension of adjectives is beginning to become blurred as the case endings themselves begin to be lost. The T scribe sometimes uses uninflected forms in the plural where we might expect inflectional <e>: e.g. *pis werin þe sawen* ‘wise were the sayings’ (line 33 cf. C *pise*, J *wyse*); *lustlike lust-nie lef dere. & ich her zu pille leren penes mine*, ‘willingly listen beloved dear ones, and I here will teach you my beliefs’ (other versions differ textually). The T scribe has final <e> on *bittere* describing the apple in our example where the strong declension is expected and where the other texts all have forms without final <e>. See also line 111 in T: *sulde nefere jise mon...* ‘a wise man should never...’ with final <e> on ‘wise’ where M and J have *zungman* and J *yongmon* ‘young man’ which may be interpreted either as having historically ‘correct’ <e>-less adjective or as a compound noun.⁸²

The other possible objection to *pocke* as ‘weak’ is that the combination <ck> normally implies that the preceding vowel is short and Middle English ‘woke’, with [ɔ:] from OE *wāc*, requires a long vowel. This objection would apply equally if the reading ‘though’ were insisted on. As noted above, the combination <ck> occurs in T’s text only in the words *stickes*, *cocken*, *cocker* and in the cluster *folck* all with preceding short vowel. Such contexts for <ck> are undoubtedly the commonest in early Middle English writing systems. But it is apparent that the combination <ck> does not always reflect an original geminate [k:] (< OE -cc-) in early Middle English, nor even necessarily imply a preceding short vowel in words without earlier gemination. There are occasional examples from contemporary SW Midland writing systems indicating that <ck> may be used as an orthographic equivalent of <k> even after a long vowel. See e.g. *Lazamon A bock(e)(n)* (< OE *bōc*) ‘books’ lines 5, 5448, 11027, 12548, 14406, 14623, 15576, 16066; *seocke(n)* (< OE *sēoc*) ‘sick’ lines 8841, 9689, 9877; *ducke* (< OF *duc*) ‘duke’ line 2466; *Lazamon B (-)lock* (< OE *lāc* ‘gift’ lines 5805,

⁸² Cf. also line 21 the C text has *he pas pise on his porde* with final <e> where T and J both have historically ‘correct’ *wis* without <e>.

8857.⁸³ Since it would be formally possible to spell the early Middle English reflex of OE *wāc* as *wocke* in the writing systems of closely neighbouring dialects it seems reasonable to extend this possibility to the T scribe's system.

The text then makes very good sense; a woman may look beautiful on the outside but very quickly she proves weak. The specific sense required is that given in *MED* s.v. *wōk* adj. 3(a) 'Of a person, the flesh, human nature: morally or spiritually feeble, irresolute; also, morally or spiritually frail, susceptible to temptation, readily led into sin or spiritual error' and cf. 3(e) 'of thoughts, desires, utterances: vain, idle; also, arising from moral frailty; ?base, wicked'.⁸⁴ This reading in *P of A* certainly produces a somewhat different sense than the versions in C, M and J. But it is quite effective in its own right. It brings out more clearly the contrast between fine looks and base behaviour as well as a more obvious parallel with the 'fellow' on the horse. 'gadeling' often has the sense in Middle English of 'rascal' or 'scoundrel' not just 'companion or fellow in arms'. We might therefore translate T's version here as follows: 'Many an apple is green on the outside, bright on tree, and bitter on the inside. So is many a woman in her fair bower, beautiful under sheet, and frail she is in a little while. So is many a scoundrel, splendid on his horse, proud on his beast, and base in his duty.'

I make no claim for this final example that the T version of *P of A* is here 'better' (or 'worse') or 'nearer the original text' — whatever that might mean — than any of the other texts. I contend merely that the T scribe himself had a clear idea of the meaning of the text he copied, that he was a professional writer and user of the English language of his time and that his text should be given credence as an example of genuine Middle English usage.

This has of necessity been a very small-scale flea-hunt. But I hope it has illustrated some of the systematic questions that must be addressed by Middle English editors, dialectologists and lexicographers. This paper celebrates the completion of the *MED* and recognises that without that great resource many of us simply could not carry out the work we do. But it is also a very positive recognition that though we rightly celebrate that the *MED* is finished, the work is not yet done.

⁸³ Cf. also C text of *O&N* line 730: *wicke-tunes* (< OE *wīc-tūn*); Worcester Cathedral, Dean and Chapter Library F. 174, the Tremulous Scribe's copy of Ælfric's *Grammar* fol. 36r: *elicio ic vtalockie* (< OE *ūt* and *ālūcan*); Wells Cathedral Library, Liber Alhus 1, fol. 14r: *lock-huer* (< OE *lōc-hwær* adv.).

⁸⁴ For this sense, see Orm lines 6184–5: '& ȝiff þatt iss þatt ȝho iss all. Wittlaes & wac. & wicke'. Note that for Orm this did not apply to the frailty of women only, but as an admonition that husband and wife should help each other to moral strength and rectitude for the saving of their souls, see further lines 6186–201.

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